

**House Energy & Commerce Subcommittee on Oversight & Investigations**

**June 7, 2023**

**Testimony of Charity Dean**

Chairs McMorris Rodgers and Griffith, Ranking Members Pallone and Castor, and distinguished members of the Committee:

Thank you for the invitation to be here today.

I believe that in order to prepare for future disease threats, we have a duty to conduct a rigorous assessment of our COVID-19 response. Even if it is painful, this thorough inventory then becomes a gift: a clear roadmap of what we must do *now* to meet future threats with strength. And that is something I've dedicated my life to: building system solutions to protect Americans from public health threats. My experience as a local and state public health official has given me a unique vantage point, which I have shared in other forums, including in Michael Lewis's *The Premonition* as well as in *Lessons from the COVID War; An investigative Report*, of which I am a co-author.

The COVID-19 response was a massive systems failure across the whole of the U.S. Public Health System, including the CDC. I want to be clear: our humans didn't fail—dedicated public servants gave it their all—our systems failed. This core failure was due to lack of an intelligence and an operational infrastructure capable of meeting the moment. Containment of a biological threat, which must always be the first objective, is not possible without these twin capabilities. They would have enabled the United States to convert disparate, scattered data into reliable intelligence, across both public and private sectors; enabling fast, unified, front-line decisions. Intelligence makes the invisible, visible.

I served as the local health officer for Santa Barbara County when the Disneyland measles outbreak struck in 2014. I received a panicked phone call that a toddler in a busy daycare center had a rash spreading down from their forehead. Their cousin had visited Disneyland a few weeks before. Soon there were two cases in young children and exposures across three adjoining counties, and a suspicious cluster in two other states. With measles, every hour matters. When a kiddo first develops the classic rash they've already been contagious for 4 days, so we're 4 days behind. It's a race against time.

A round-the-clock flurry of phone calls, emails, and fax machines ensued with my tribe of local health officers, which now included more than five other states. My wall was covered with sticky notes connecting locations, suspects, and large exposure venues. We formed an ad hoc intelligence infrastructure using tools essentially from the 1970s. The outbreak ultimately spread to seven states, Mexico, and Canada before we contained it.

A college meningococcal outbreak had similar lessons. On a Saturday afternoon in 2013, I received a phone call alerting me to a college kid with what appeared to be meningococcal disease—a bacterial blood infection that goes to the brain and spreads fast among students. I immediately attempted to form an intelligence picture: how many kids were infected? Which dorm rooms, which sports teams?

Operating without much of a playbook or intelligence, I implemented a range of broad, temporary measures all at once: canceled parties, canceled sports, gave post-exposure antibiotics to 1,200 students. And I enlisted the university, ERs, and local businesses in the hunt for more early cases. We found four more. By contrast, the CDC wanted to implement one mitigation measure at a time, like a controlled academic study. At the end of one long conference call with them, I was told I was alone in my decisions and response.

Trust is the currency of public health. It is earned with honesty and transparency, and has little to do with official government titles. To quote Braveheart, “Men don’t follow titles; they follow courage.” Together with the university and community, we contained the outbreak. A few years later the CDC published guidance, with our approach as a model.

I won’t dwell on the COVID-19 story, as much ink has been spilled. Suffice it to say, as the #2 doctor for the State of California, I experienced the same phenomenon yet again. We were flying blind, relying on an antiquated public health system—built on disconnected local nodes that are siloed from each other—to meet a fast-moving, 21st century biological threat. Intelligence sharing, when it happened, was slow, fragmented, and often uni-directional. I found the CDC to be disconnected from front-lines response; taking months or years to share aggregate data or publish guidance. My personal motto—no one is coming to save us—served as my north star, and that reality was experienced by many governors and business leaders alike.

To quote Edwards Deming, “A bad system beats a good person every time.”

In September 2020, I founded The Public Health Company (“PHC”) out of a deep conviction that a new intelligence capability must exist built on transparency and accountability. I believed that the core technology for this capability had to come not from government, but from the innovation made possible by the private sector with its advances in artificial intelligence and data streaming.

Nearly three years later, we have now built from scratch commercial-grade software with a scalable threat agnostic architecture. What we are building will enable our customers to learn of developing threats with near real-time situational awareness, and enable aligned operational responses across large geographies and multiple decision-makers.

Our company is venture capital backed, and we are honored to be supported by BARDA Ventures within ASPR. They, too, believe intelligence is a critical medical countermeasure and that what PHC is building can be an important complement to, and aligned with, the U.S. government with the ultimate goal of greatly improving our intelligence infrastructure for the benefit of both the private and public sectors.

In closing, I want to emphasize my belief that the United States is still capable of solving hard problems. Solutions will require innovation, courage, and bold leadership. I am deeply grateful to every Committee member for your tireless efforts to that end. Thank you.